

## An Analysis Of Postmodern Elements in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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### Abstract

The paper entitled “An Analysis of Postmodern Elements in “*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*” is an inquiry into the world of postmodernism created by Italo Calvino through his magnum-opus work, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. It speaks of the postmodern techniques prominent in the literary work and how these help in analysing the novel at hand. It mainly details about the elements of postmodernism as found in the novel. The conclusion remains an open ended discussion as far as postmodernism (cannot be definitive) is concerned.

**Keywords:** Post modernism, Reader, You, Fiction, Reader - Response theory, Metafiction

Postmodernism is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century movement in arts, architecture and criticism which was a departure in from modernism. Postmodernism is often associated with deconstruction and post structuralism. A host of movements which was influenced by postmodernism reacted again the tendencies of modernism. The term ‘postmodern’ was first used around the 1870s.

Postmodernism involves not only a continuation, sometimes carried to an extreme, of the countertraditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had, inevitably, become in their turn conventional, as well as to overthrow the elitism of modernist “high art” by recourse for models to the “mass culture” in film, television, newspaper cartoons, and popular music. (Abrams 177)

Postmodernism is a rejection of totality, of the notion that planning could be ‘comprehensive’, widely applied regardless of context and rational. In this sense postmodernism is a rejection of its predecessor. Postmodernism made a lot of changes in the

literary field. Postmodern literature is literature characterised by reliance on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox and the unreliable narrator and is defined as a style or a trend which emerged in post-World War II era. As the philosopher, Richard Tarnas states, Postmodernism "cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various metaphysical overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself" (Kellner 57).

Italo Calvino is a name heard in the postmodern world. He is famous for his way of writing and ideas he brought up in every novel he wrote. His most discussed work is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Calvino has written a guidebook on how postmodernism works with 'Traveller'. He incorporates so many postmodern techniques that it would be impossible to describe them all. Calvino puts a literary spin on it, replacing 'seeing / perceiving' with 'writing'. It is a "novel about novels, a book about the reading and writing of books". There are many passages scattered throughout the novel which go into detail about the production of books. The sub-story contained within the numbered chapters is an old-fashioned mystery about two sides in a literature war: those for the purity of written novels, and those for the counterfeiting and mixing-up of literature. One chapter even deals with an entire country caught up in the idea of counterfeiting: "you find yourself prisoner of a system in which every aspect of life is a counterfeit, a fake" (Calvino 215). Even the sex scene is written in language terms: "Your body is now being subjected to a systematic reading" (Calvino 155).

One of the most obvious techniques Calvino uses is to include us; the Reader into the novel. He does this by using a second-person narrative technique, addressing us as 'you'. The first chapter is basically what one would do when buying and beginning to read a novel. This whole chapter, and many after, address us as part of the inner workings of the novel, essentially placing us inside the story. But this is not just limited to the numbered chapters. The first 'story' has a first-person narrator. There is no third-person perspective in the novel. This allows the reader to enter into the action, to make us feel as though we are part of the unfolding narrative.

The Reader is always interrupted in the middle of one of the novels he is reading, creating a discontinuous flow. An example is when the Reader opens the book he thinks will be the continuation of the first, and "you realise the novel you are holding has nothing to do with the one you were reading yesterday" (Calvino 33). This is repeated all throughout the novel, and the only seemingly straight forward storyline is what the Reader experiences. We can end up in no doubts that this work of Calvino has made a revolution in the world of literature.

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* written by Italo Calvino, is one of the most awarded and criticised work. This work can be sited as an example of postmodernism due to the presence of postmodern elements throughout the novel. The style of writing, elements included and the way storyline is represented is perfect. This book has been translated to English by William Weaver. What's surprising is most of the famous critics and writers have either spoken or wrote papers about this work.

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is a story of two readers who embark upon a journey to find a full version of a book they have purchased. Calvino's novel is told in second-person narration with shifting plots, style, and voice. The main character of the novel

is “you”. As a reader, you have purchased a book only to realize that it is not a complete version. At the same time, another reader is also experiencing the same issue. Somehow the two of you meet and begin a journey to find the complete version. But you run into problems. Every time you find what you think is the full version, it turns out to be another incomplete book. Your journey takes you to an additional three books, where you find that the last book reveals the true intention of the author. You find out that the original writer of the book developed several versions for multiple clients who happen to be underground organizations. You, the reader, discover at the end of reading Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* that reading and learning never ends.

A certain reader is reading a novel that breaks off into another novel and the reader seeks to investigate the origin of such unpardonable publishing mistakes. It turns out that a certain translator Ermes Marana had proposed a stratagem in which he would break off the translation at the moment of greatest suspense and would start translating another novel, inserting it into the first through some rudimentary expedient. When translating literature of a moribund language, he got confused and the texts that he had translated were from another novel by a Polish writer. Such production defect in copies on behalf of his egregious blunder repeatedly forced readers to abandon reading. Through the help the very diabolical Ermes Marana, a Japanese firm plotted to manufacture author Silas Flannery’s novels by computer and contrived to produce absolutely new ones in order to invade the world market. The books were re-translated back to English and none of the critics could have distinguished which from the true Flannerys. The books were really plagiarisms from little known Japanese authors of novels that, having had no success, were sent to be pulped. The art of writing and reading what an author means for a reader to read from the writing is brought forth to the full actuality through the reader’s indefatigable effort to unmask the identities of translations.

The author addresses directly to the reader and shapes the story in the perspective of the reader-in other words, the author somehow deprives his authority and has to involve reader into decision-making. The book has left open to the reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name, which would automatically have made him the equivalent of a third person, of a character, and so he had been kept a pronoun in its abstract condition-suitable for any attribute and any action. The book asks the reader to reflect minutely on the very activity of reading, which most of us take for granted. The book itself is also about characters practicing such reflection so raptly that the world around them falls away. The novel explores the complex relationship between reading, writing, and publishing.

The most magnificent aspect of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* is that the book explores the relationship between what the author has written explicitly and how what is being written down in the book stimulates, evokes, and obviates past experiences, memories, and thoughts. Reader might remember very well everything he has read, perhaps for whom each book becomes intensified with his reading of it at a given time, once and for all. As a result, reader might have preserved the books in the memory and prefers to preserve the books as objects, keeping them within proximity.

Italo Calvino further explores this argument about reading a “different book” other than the one currently being read. Reader, in other words, might be reading another book besides the one before his eyes—a book that yet does to exist, but since the reader wants it,

cannot fail to exist. Reading becomes some abstract idea through which reader measures himself against something else that is not present, something that belongs to the immaterial, invisible dimension, because it can only be thought, concocted, and imagined or it was once and is no longer attainable. *If On a Winter's Night A Traveller* challenges reader to have seized on a thought that the text suggests to it, or maybe a feeling, or a question, or even just an image. The book encourages reader going off on a tangent and wandering from thought to thought, in such itinerary of reasoning that reader should feel to pursue to the end.

The book begins by describing the art and nature of reading, and is divided into twenty-two passages. The odd-numbered passages and the final passage are narrated in the second person. These chapters concern the reader's adventures in reading Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. In due course, the reader meets a woman, who is also addressed in her own chapter, separately, and also in the second person. There are phrases and descriptions which will be eerily similar between the narrative and first-chapters. The ending uncovers a hidden element to the entire book. The novel, even its plot, is an open track where even the author himself questions his motives of the writing process. Other themes include the subjectivity of meaning, the relationship between fiction and life, what makes an ideal reader and author, and authorial originality.

Cimmeria is a fictional country in the novel. The country is described as having existed as an independent state between World War I and World War II. The capital is Örkko, and its principal resources are peat and by-products, bituminous compounds. It seems to have been located somewhere on the Gulf of Bothnia. As Calvino concludes the alleged, fictional encyclopaedia entry concerning Cimmeria: "In successive territorial divisions between her powerful neighbours the young nation was soon erased from the map; the autochthonous population was dispersed; Cimmerian language and culture had no development" (Calvino 43-44).

The pair of chapters following the two on Cimmeria and its literature is followed by one describing another fictional country called the Cimbrian People's Republic, a communist nation which allegedly occupied part of Cimmeria during the latter's decline. The Cimmerians were an ancient tribal group, contemporary with the Scythians, who lived in southern Ukraine. The Cimbrian language still exists today, and is spoken by 2230 people in northern Italy, not too remote from Calvino's home in Turin. Whether Calvino knew that his fictional languages were real, is debatable. Postmodernism is a new form of writing where the author is free with his style and breaks the rules of most classical pieces of writing. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Italo Calvino enters the mind of the reader and uses the text as a medium of making the reader think what Calvino wants him to think. In this piece of writing, Calvino demonstrates pastiche, fragmentation, globalization, experimentation, and refutation of the consumer material world which are all components of postmodernism. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is an adventurous piece of writing that shows how disconnected random stories may be but nevertheless form an exciting plot.

The most noticeable aspect of Calvino's style is his ability to alternate between stories that have nothing in common and form a serious plot between the readers. For example, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, the first story about Madame Marne, Calvino foreshadows Ludmilla's entry in the numbered chapters. There is a loss of identity for Ludmilla who is portrayed as a classy Madame Marne in one story then as the adventurous and the sensual

woman-rights protector who shows Ludmilla's strong and decisive personality in another. Also, the whole confusion with the books and the kaleidoscopes aim to confuse the reader and make him lost in his own identity.

Pastiche is very evident in all the short stories in Calvino's novel where he takes ideas from several other writers and styles and manipulates them to fit in his plot. For example, he takes the essence of Japanese writing where he tenderly describes emotions and feelings from *On the Carpet of Leaves Illuminated by the Moon*, and then he has several references to Chekhov the Russian author who usually portrays the sad conditions in Russia at the turn of the century and expresses them in *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo*. Calvino also experiments with colonial literature in "Around an empty grave" where he chooses an Indian protagonist called Nacho and an American Indian ground setting. By joining all these diverse pieces of literature, Calvino is subconsciously globalizing literature in one book. He experiments by writing disconnected stories which no other author has tackled before which makes it an experimental postmodern novel.

Metafiction or self-reflexivity is another postmodern technique found in the novel. Metafiction is founding fictional stories when the story examines the elements of fiction itself. For example, a story that explores how stories are made by commenting on character types, how plots are formed or other aspects of storytelling is engaged in an example of metafiction. Metafiction can be playful or dramatic, but it always forces the reader to think about the nature of storytelling itself and how fictional stories are made. Calvino here forces the reader to be more active both physically and mentally while reading. He wants the reader to explore each corner of his novel.

The third and prominent postmodern element in the novel is Reader-Response theory. This theory gained prominence in the late 1960s that focuses on the reader or audience reaction to a particular text, perhaps more than the text itself. "Reader-response criticism does not designate any one critical theory, but rather a focus on the process of reading a literary text that is shared by many of the critical modes" (Abrams 255). Unlike text-based approaches such as New Criticism, which are grounded upon some objective meaning already present in the work being examined, reader-response criticism argues that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences it.

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is not meant to be a story any sort of reader can read and enjoy. It goes further than that by encouraging people to use books to communicate and let go of the very fast and unemotional methods of communication and media like television and other modern devices. This is very evident from the very beginning of the novel when he writes, "No, I don't want to watch TV! I'm reading I don't want to be disturbed!" (Calvino 5). In this sense, Calvino wants us to appreciate the book and give it the concentration, time and respect it deserves.

It is obvious that *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is a postmodern novel from the above analysis. A comprehensive search for the postmodern elements in the novel is an unending process. As the theory of postmodernism doesn't stick on to a definitive meaning, this article too remains open-ended. As the advocates of postmodernism finds a 'completeness' in incompleteness, I too believe that the article is 'complete' in that sense.

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